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ABSTRACT

This study considers and reports on role perception beliefs held by early childhood preservice teachers, student teachers, and classroom teachers; identifies important factors in teaching roles; and highlights areas of discrepancy between what teachers believe to be important and "real world" practice. The Teacher Perception Survey was randomly distributed to two groups of students: those with little experience (N=31) who were engaged in coursework at the senior level of their degree programs and students who had completed all course work (N=23) and were engaged in student teaching. It was also distributed to classroom teachers in early childhood education (N=10). Subjects were asked to rank their perceived teaching roles according to "ideal" importance and the importance of those roles in the "real" world, and to identify factors that conflicted with or supported their beliefs. Data were clustered into five classroom role perception categories: affective, cognitive, physical, contextual, and disciplinary. All groups identified affective and cognitive roles as the two most important for early childhood teachers. Differences found between "ideal" and "real" world role perceptions and practices found in classroom situations are also noted. According to preservice teachers, the affective role in the ideal world is more important than in the real world. The cognitive role was identified as the second most important element in both ideal and real worlds. A tabular summary of role perceptions of early childhood teachers is appended. (LL)

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Role Perceptions of Early Childhood Teachers

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Role Perceptions of Early Childhood Teachers

The results of current research indicate that there are differences in perceived role perceptions of teachers and the practices they find in "real-life" classroom situations. Additionally, there appears to be some disequilibrium between teachers' role perceptions and administrative priorities. The results seem to cluster around three issues: (a) the issue of personal beliefs or perceptions of the teacher, (b) the issue of adequate and appropriate preparation, and (c) the issue of administrative priorities or the notion of the "business of schooling."

The first issue centers on teachers' perceptions of who they are and what they do as teachers. These beliefs are influenced by what is taught in teacher preparation programs as well as their own experiences as students in the classroom. Often, the images that novice teachers have about their roles as teachers are overshadowed by the demands of mandated curriculum, classroom management, and perhaps most of all, the school leader. Lorri Nielseen (l99l) indicates the importance of and necessity for teachers having input on the major issues that determine, to a great extent, the expectations of those charged with the responsibility of teaching. According to Nielseen (l99l) it is imperative that teachers have an opportunity to give a variety of perspectives on their roles as teachers in order that teachers may then demonstrate to students their worth as professionals.

Nielseen's suggestions are congruent with Ciseell's (l987) report on why teachers select the profession of teaching. This study indicates that when experienced teachers and novice teachers are compared, they have diverse perceptions of the skills necessary for being and becoming a successful teacher. Once indoctrinated into the culture of "real-life" teaching, teachers find that their expected roles as teachers differ from those roles they believed were important as beginning teachers (Ciseell, l987). This information suggests that teachers who are not adequately prepared to deal with the conflict between what they believe to be important

as a teacher and the demands of the "real" world of teaching are often frustrated and unfulfilled. This frustration and lack of fulfillment results in teachers who leave the profession in search of more rewarding occupations (Kerchner, 1981).

The second issue is closely related to the first in that the dissatisfaction that teachers experience may result, in part, from inadequate preparation. For too long, institutions of higher education and public schools have maintained their separateness. This is no longer possible. Current reform movements have indicated that there is a need for more open communication and the development of partnerships (Holmes Group, 1986). If teacher preparation programs are to successfully prepare teachers, then collaboration with school personnel is imperative. This collaboration should serve in gaining insight and understanding into what classroom contexts actually reflect in relation to what teacher educators say they are like. This collaboration must be done in a spirit of long-term collegiality; it can no longer be brief forays into schools by higher education faculty engaged in research.

Third is the issue of school administration and the agendas of leaders who are charged with the business of "schooling." The closer the match between the school leader's perception of the role of the teacher and the teacher's believed role, the more content and satisfied the teacher is in the profession of teaching. Unfortunately, even when the alignment between the two is close, there is never a perfect match. The agendas of the school administrator are often more global; they go beyond the confines of individual classrooms and creating inviting contexts for children to learn, interact and grow emotionally, socially, physically and cognitively. Administrators must take into consideration the importance of teachers' role beliefs. Sustaining these roles will influence performance and determine, to some extent, the degree of satisfaction experienced by teachers. Delegating power to teachers in making decisions that directly impact themselves and their classrooms may be the first step toward addressing the conflict that exists as a result of administrative focus versus teachers' perceptions of their roles as professionals.

Teachers' perceptions of their roles as professionals, administrators' beliefs about the roles of teachers, and the experiences teachers have in teacher education programs contribute to the successful (or unsuccessful) entry of those teachers into the profession. The problems encountered by teachers and administrators when perceptions are not aligned create conflict that must be addressed by all engaged in the business of education--partnerships must be established that allow and encourage dialogue between teacher educators, school administrators, and teachers.

The purpose of the research presented in this paper was to consider and report on the beliefs of early childhood pre-service teachers, student teachers, and teachers about their perceived roles as teachers. The authors attempted to identify factors, described by these groups of teachers, as important in their roles as teachers in early childhood classrooms. Inasmuch as teachers must feel some degree of satisfaction and fulfillment with what they believe to be their responsibilities as early childhood teachers, this research report attempts to illuminate the areas of discrepancy between what teachers believe to be important and "real world" practice.

Methodology

Subjects

Subjects were education majors and represent two groups: (a) students and (b) teachers. Subjects can further be described according to levels of clinical experience: (a) students with little experience (n=31)--these pre-service teachers were engaged in course work at the senior level of their degree programs; (b) students who had completed all course work and were at the final stage of their teacher preparation program (n=23)--these students were engaged in student teaching experiences; (c) classroom teachers in early childhood education (n=10).

Procedure

The Teacher Perception Survey containing open-ended questions about the roles of teachers was distributed to a random sample of students enrolled in undergraduate, senior-level

early childhood methods courses. The survey was mailed to a random sample of early childhood student teachers and classroom teachers. Respondents were asked to rank perceived teaching roles according to their "ideal" importance and the importance of those roles in the "real" world of the classroom. Last, respondents were asked to identify factors that either conflicted or supported the beliefs they hold about their perceived roles as teachers in early childhood classrooms.

Data analysis was conducted by analyzing individual responses to items on the survey. These responses were coded and further analyzed by the respondent's level of experience. A meta-analysis revealed coded data clustered into five general categories: (a) Affective Roles; (b) Cognitive Roles; (c) Contextual Roles; (d) Disciplinary Roles; and (e) Physical Roles.

Results

Results are reported in Table 1 for all groups. Early childhood pre-service teachers, student teachers and classroom teachers most often listed role labels in the Affective Role Cluster as being important for an early childhood teacher. The Affective Role Cluster included responses such as: "attitude development", "communication", "emotional development", "expression of feelings", "friend", "listener", "love of learning", "moral development", "promoting peer interaction", "role model/molder", "self-concept", "social development", and "enhancing the value of education".

The Cognitive Role Cluster was the second most often ranked role for an early childhood teacher by pre-service teachers, student teachers and teachers. The Cognitive Role Cluster included roles identified as: "academic development", "achievement of potential", "career development", "critical thinkers", "language development" and "mental development".

The third most often ranked role for early childhood teachers by the three groups was the Physical Role. Students and teachers characterized these roles with labels like:

"caregivers", "attending to hygiene", "cleanliness and dress", and the "overall physical development of children".

According to students and teachers in this study, the Contextual Roles were fourth in importance as perceived roles for early childhood teachers. The Contextual Role Cluster included: "providing stimulating", "stable", and "supportive environments" which also "nurtured and encouraged expansion of experiences in school".

The least often ranked role for early childhood teachers by students and teachers was the Disciplinary Role. The Disciplinary Role Cluster included role labels such as: "citizenship", "self-control" and "fostering good work habits".

Discussion

Although all groups identified Affective and Cognitive Roles as the two most important roles of an early childhood teacher, it is interesting to note differences between the "ideal" and "real" world roles as reported by pre-service teachers, student teachers and teachers. According to the pre-service teachers, the Affective Role, in the "ideal" world is more important than in the "real" world. This may indicate that even for students who have little clinical experience, there is a recognition that the role of an early childhood teacher as a nurturer, caregiver, etc., is not always the most important function in the actual classroom situation. Student teachers share the same beliefs about the differences found between what the "ideal" role, in relation to the Affective Role Cluster, should be for an early childhood teacher and the actual role of the teacher in the field. Likewise, the responses of teachers indicate they see a discrepancy between the "ideal" and "real" roles of early childhood teachers as these roles pertain to affective behaviors. That is, "ideally" the single most important role of early childhood teachers should be related to those with the Affective Role Cluster; however, in authentic classroom situations there is less emphasis on this role than in the "ideal" situation.

The Cognitive Role Cluster was identified as the second most important role in the "ideal" situation and the "real" classroom context. For pre-service teachers and student teachers, the "ideal" and "real" were equally ranked; however, teachers ranked the "real" teaching situation as slightly higher than the "ideal." This difference may indicate that early childhood teachers believe that cognitive roles take on more importance in the classroom than they "ideally" should.

The physical role was ranked third by pre-service teachers, tied in the third ranking with the disciplinary role by teachers and tied with the contextual and disciplinary role by student teachers. Pre-service teachers believed that "ideally" the physical roles of teachers were the third most important roles in early childhood education. This same group indicated that in reality this role was more important than "ideally" they believe it should be. Teachers shared similar beliefs. That is, they ranked the physical role as important but ranked it slightly more important in "real" classroom situations than "ideally" they believe it should be.

In comparison with both pre-service teachers and students teachers, teachers did not disregard the importance of context, but see a greater importance for other roles, namely, the disciplinary role and physical role. The contextual cluster ranking for the early childhood pre-service teachers appears to reflect an emphasis in professional courses on developmentally appropriate practice. Student teachers, with some clinical experience, indicate a greater recognition of the importance of the contextual role as compared to pre-service teachers.

Student teachers ranked the discipline role as equally important with the contextual and physical role. This group indicates that in the real classroom, discipline is slightly more important than "ideally" it should be. Because these students have had more clinical experience than pre-service teachers who do not rank the discipline role at all, classroom experiences may have given them insights into real-life teaching situations that require disciplinary actions by teachers.

It is interesting to note that during data analysis the authors found pre-service teachers' responses reflected an emphasis on pre-professional education courses as well as in professional courses on the three domains: affective, cognitive, and physical. Although this group responded to questions using these labels, when asked to elaborate, explain or tell why, they could not attach the labels to the notion of teacher's roles. It appears that some of these students were using the rhetoric of education with little understanding of how the language plays out in the reality of teaching.

ROLE PERCEPTIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS

SUMMARY

PERCEIVED ROLE CLUSTERS	PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS			STUDENT TEACHERS			TEACHERS		
	RANK	1-3		RANK	1-3		RANK	1-3	
		I	R		I	R		I	R
CLUSTER 1: AFFECTIVE ROLES	1	19	16	1	16	14	1	8	6
CLUSTER 2: COGNITIVE ROLES	2	11	11	2	5	5	2	5	6
CLUSTER 3: CONTEXTUAL ROLES	4	7	8	4	2	3	5	1	1
CLUSTER 4: DISCIPLINARY ROLES	5	0	0	4	1	2	3.5	2	2
CLUSTER 5: PHYSICAL ROLES	3	3	5	4	2	2	3.5	1	2

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